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Interview With Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer of Yedioth Ahronoth

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President's Upcoming Visit to Israel/ Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel

Q. First of all, we would like to thank you very much for your readiness to see us and to have this interview for us. We can assure you that in Israel, you can be elected for the third term—[*laughter*]—with one exception: The day after the first day in office, the media will kill you. [*Laughter*] This is Israel. But you have so many really admirers in Israel.

The President. Well, thank you. I'm really looking forward to going again. As you know, this is my first trip as the President. I had the honor——

Q. I saw you. I had the opportunity to shake your hand in the Knesset.

The President. I was thrilled to go in 1998. One of the great ironies of my first trip to Israel was that, as well documented, I was given a tour of the West Bank by Ariel Sharon. Little did we both realize then that we would be sitting together in the hopes of constructing peace; that we knew we'd be—we didn't know that we'd be President and Prime Minister at the time.

Q. And yet he was the leader of the opposition at the time.

The President. Well, he was in the Cabinet. He was a settlements man. And we were flying—and it was a very interesting moment. And I can remember so well Prime Minister Sharon pointing to a hill, and he said, "This is where I engaged, as a young tank officer, my first battle, and see how far it is to our capital and our civilization." In other words, it was—his purpose was to make it clear to me the strategic issues facing Israel. And then we flew over the West Bank, and it was a fascinating moment.

And it was—history works in odd ways, and sometimes you're never sure about the twists and turns that life will bring. And so I'm looking forward to meeting with the Sharon family and express my admiration for a man with whom I was able to——

Q. Two years from today he had his stroke.

The President. Yes, 2 years to this day.

Q. Today; today.

The President. Anyway, it will be an interesting moment for me, to express my sympathies to his family. He was an interesting man and—anyway, I'm looking forward to going to see the current leadership in Israel as well as the Palestinians and the Arab region.

President's Upcoming Visit to Israel

Q. Could we ask—could we start asking questions?

The President. Please, yes.

Q. Your visit to Israel—what is the vision you would like to convey to the Israeli public?

The President. The vision is, one, that I fully understand that the world is confronting extremists—the world must confront extremists who want to impose their ideology on peaceful people by the use of terror; and that we're engaged in an ideological struggle that requires resolve and vision; and that the best way to defeat the ideology of hate is with an ideology of hope, and that is manifested in a society based upon liberty; that the two-state solution is in Israel's long-term security interests, and that there's hard work to be done by the leaders of the Palestinians and the Israelis.

I will also assure Israel that there is no way that a Israeli democracy can accept a terrorist state on her border; that there is a way, and I'm optimistic that there are enough Palestinians committed to a state based upon liberty, that we can achieve—that they can achieve, with U.S. help, the vision of two states side by side in peace.

Iran

Q. Mr. President, the Israeli people are worried, first and foremost, because of the danger that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. Can you, Mr. President, assure the Israelis that such a danger will never occur under your watch?

The President. Well, I can assure the people of Israel and others in the Middle East that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be a danger to world peace. I have said so very explicitly. I believe that the—and I believe we have put in place a system that encourages pressure on the Iranians to come up with—to either have a choice between isolation and financial difficulty or a rational approach to what they claim is their sovereign right, which is the ability to have nuclear power.

Now, they have been untrustworthy; they have been unwilling to be transparent and open. And so our demands are to the Iranians, not only with our voice but the voice of the international community thus far, is, you must be transparent; you must be open; and you—because of your failure to report programs, that you cannot be trusted with the ability to learn how to enrich. And so my message to the Israeli people is, I fully understand the threat; that we spend a lot of time on this issue; and that we will continue to exert maximum pressure through the international community to peacefully resolve this issue.

Q. I'm sure you've heard the report by the American intelligence——

The President. Yes, I have. [*Laughter*].

Q. Unfortunately for us, we followed it too. How it affected the chances to stop Iran from becoming a danger?

The President. Actually, if you study the report carefully, it basically said—not basically—it said that Iran had a secret program——

Q. In the year 2003.

The President. Right. But my message to the American people was, is that a nontransparent society that had a program could easily have another program. And therefore, the intensity of the effort must not decline, but must stay strong—and the intensity of the effort being to prevent them from developing the know-how.

Secondly, there are three stages to the development of a nuclear weapon: one, materials out of which to make a weapon. That's why we've got to stop them from enriching, and that's where our focus is. Two, the ability to take materials and to make it into a warhead or a bomb—and we don't know their capacities at this point in time, but it's fairly general knowledge on how to produce a weapon out of materials. And three, rockets—well, two of the three continue to exist. And therefore, to say a weapons program does not exist is not the complete truth. And so our focus is to prevent the one thing over which we believe the international community can have influence, which is to stop the capacity to enrich.

Thirdly, the report did say that as a result of pressures, the Iranians suspended their military program. Well, if pressures worked in the past, my hope is that pressures will work in the future. Part of the reason I'm going to the Middle East is to make it abundantly clear to nations in that part of the world that we view Iran as a threat, and that the NIE in no way lessens that threat, but in fact, clarifies the threat.

Middle East Peace Process/Iran

Q. If Israel comes with a smoking gun during the year 2008, are you going to back an Israeli operation—military operation?

The President. My message to all in the region is, I believe we can solve this diplomatically, and that pressure must work. I have said, of course, that the United States keeps all options on the table. That's the United States policy. And that—but I believe the best solution is going to be one that encourages Iranian isolation through international pressures that will cause the Iranians to have to make a strategic choice. Now, people say, "Well, what do you mean by that? What kind of pressures?" Well, there are financial pressures that we have exerted and will continue to work with others to exert.

Now, look, I readily recognize that one of the real challenges is to convince people that peace is more important than market share; that achieving long-term peace in the Middle East is more important than someone's companies having a share of equipment——

Q. American or——

The President. Well, I'm saying any company. Of course, American companies are not involved with the exportation of goods and services to Iran. Therefore, in this case, I mean, the logic would say that extends to not only European countries but countries from around the world. Same with financial institutions; that we expect there to be significant pressure placed upon Iranian financial institutions, particularly those that are known to be involved in proliferation.

And so the strategy is more than just words; it is an action-oriented strategy, aimed at convincing people inside of Iran that there's a better way forward. If you look at my speeches or listen to my speeches, you'll notice that I constantly speak to the Iranian people and make it clear to them that the isolation that they're now suffering and the economic deprivation that is occurring as a result of isolation is a result of their Government's decisions. Our beef is not with the Iranian people; our beef is with a Government that has hidden the program.

And by the way, back to the NIE very quickly. The international response ought to be that, okay, whether or not you agree with the NIE or not, at least recognize that they had a program at one point in time, and demand that Iran explain it. We shouldn't be trying to explain why we know what we know. We ought to be focusing on the Iranians to say, you tell us why you had a program; you tell us about the—if you want to be an international player, it's up to you to explain.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Q. Mr. President, I'll try to put the question another way. If the Israeli Prime Minister will present you with a smoking gun and will tell you, look, we can't live with such a threat, and we'll destroy the Iranian nuclear sites, you will support Israel; you will give Israel—you will let Israel to do so?

The President. The policy of the United States is to solve this diplomatically.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel/ Middle East Peace Process/President's Upcoming Visit to Israel

Q. You know, Israel is—Israeli people are confused regarding our own Government. There is now a big discussion in Israel regarding the blunders of the second Lebanon war. And at the same time, you are familiar with the September 6th—whatever happens there, we don't know; I'm sure you know. Can you tell us what is your impression of the, I would say, of the way the Israeli Government is handling our own military.

The President. I can only tell you about my personal relationship with Prime Minister Olmert. That's the person with whom I have spent the most time. I, of course, see the Foreign Minister or the Defense Minister at meetings, but my time is spent with Prime Minister Olmert. I trust him; I like him; and I think he's a man of strength.

Prime Minister Olmert—first of all, one thing I look for is, I look for vision: Can somebody see a hopeful future? A lot of times in the—this complicated world in which we live, we stay so focused on the moment that it's hard to see a vision that reaches beyond the immediate. And so when I talk to Prime Minister Olmert, I listen very carefully about his vision for the future because what we're talking about at Annapolis is vision, is giving people something to be for, something to hope for.

The whole purpose of our discussions at Annapolis has been to advance what a state would look like. The state is subject to the roadmap, the obligations of both sides before the state can come into being; it's subject to the roadmap. But there's got to be a vision because a vision is inspirational, a vision is hopeful. There's got to be something that the Palestinians can say, if—"Here's what we're for; therefore, let us renounce our desire to destroy Israel; let us recognize that it must exist as a neighbor. So, support us." I believe there's enough people in the Palestinian Territories who are sick of the failures of the past, sick of broken promise. And yet they have yet to have something specifically defined around which they can rally. That's the purpose.

And so when I talk to Prime Minister Olmert, I listen very carefully to whether or not he's able to think beyond the moment. And I've come to the conclusion that, yes, he is a man of vision. He understands the significance of defining a hopeful state. And it's hopeful not just for the Palestinians, but it's hopeful for Israel as well. After all, he

ran on a platform that said—now, this is a major shift in Israeli policy; it started with Ariel Sharon, as you know—which is two states, based upon the premise that liberty will bring peace. Now, of course, his concern is that the imposition of a state before certain conditions have been met—that's why I say, "subject to the roadmap." And the United States, as I said early, recognizes that there cannot be a state that harbors the desire to destroy its neighbor. No government can accept that, and I understand that.

And so I trust Olmert. His——

Q. Do you?

The President. I do trust him.

Q. You trust Olmert, period?

The President. I trust him. I hope—hopefully he'll say the same about me. Hopefully—you see, one of the things in politics that happens often is, people sometimes won't tell you really what's on their mind. It happens here in America. For example, you'll have politicians walk in the Oval Office and say, "Hey, President, I'm with you." And then all of a sudden, the heat gets on—[*laughter*]—and it turns out, they're not with you.

Q. You feel it at your back.

The President. Yes. Well, I feel—and I've had enough conversations, heart-to-heart conversations with the Prime Minister. I understand Israeli politics is very complicated. It's tough. It is full-contact karate. [*Laughter*] And——

Q. Not unlike American——

The President. Not really. Not really. Because the President is—even though we've got our politics and even though I've got tough relations at times with Congress, the President sets foreign policy. He is constantly worried about a coalition. And I understand that. I understand the difficulty he faces. But in spite of those difficulties, I'm interested in strategic visions based upon peace. And I firmly believe he has that vision. And obviously, he's going to have to work his way through the Israeli politics, and he's going to have to be mindful of what's happening elsewhere.

And the United States, by the way, can help both parties. That's why I'm going, to help boost the confidence of both parties to reach out for a vision. And by the way, the trip is more than just going to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. I'm also going to the Arab world—for two reasons. One is to convince the Arab nations that Israel is a partner—should be a partner in peace; that this vision is in the interests not only of Israel and Palestinians, but it's in the interests of the Arab world.

Q. You expect to achieve something tangible?

The President. Well, we achieved something very tangible. Look, you got to understand that in a matter as complicated as this issue, that it requires a lot of diligence and a lot of time and a lot of effort. There was a major breakthrough at Annapolis when the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian President addressed a roomful of diplomats, high-ranking officials from the Middle East, as well as the rest of the world. And so now we must follow up on that success. In other words, they were in the room listening very carefully to the visions of both nations. And the American President can help move the process forward by reminding friends and allies in the Middle East about the importance of the two-state solution and what they can do to help.

And the third thing, of course, is to spend time talking about the strategic implications of a U.S. presence in a way that bolsters governments and, at the same time, helps serve as a bulwark against aggressive regimes such as Iran. And so it's a multifaceted agenda that I'm really looking forward to carrying on there in the Middle East.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. But still, Mr. President, do you see a chance to sign a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the——

The President. Yes, I do, before I leave.

Q. Before you leave?

The President. Yes, I do. I do. I'm an optimistic guy.

Q. ——by initials or by full execution?

The President. Well, first of all—no. First of all, the—I envision Israel and Palestine sitting down at a table, signing—this is what a state would look like, subject to the roadmap. There's work to be done.

Q. And concluding an agreement?

The President. On what the state would look like, absolutely. Yes, I do. I think it can happen. And I believe both parties want it to happen. Now, they got work to do, and one of the reasons I'm going is to remind them of the work they got to do. See, people say to me, "All you got to do is go over there and say—impose the solution." No, we want the solution to last. This has got to be negotiated in good faith, and it's hard work. Both leaders have got constituencies they've got to deal with—skeptical publics. And I believe the U.S. President can help keep the process moving, and that's what my trip is all about.

Israeli Settlements/Middle East Peace Process

Q. Unauthorized settlement, it is something which—an issue which is between the United States and Israel for a long time.

The President. Yes, we expect them to honor their commitments. The Israeli Government has said that they're going to get rid of unauthorized settlements, and that's what we expect. That's what we've been told.

Q. Not before you come, you know.

The President. Well, that will be on the—that will, of course, be an agenda item. But Prime Minister—both Prime Ministers with whom I have worked understand our position. Both have agreed, by the way, of unauthorized settlements.

Q. They agree?

The President. Both understand, as well, that I said conditions on the ground, the realities of the situation will help determine what a—the borders look like. And so I have made some—at least from what the U.S. perspective looks like—some statements that will help move the process forward. But the unauthorized settlements, which is different from authorized settlements, is an issue we've been very clear on. But I've also made statements on the settlements as well.

As I said, realities on the ground will help define the border—the eventual border of what the Palestinian state will look like. And the state will come into being subject to the conditions set out in the roadmap, which means we've got a lot of work to do. One of the things I'll be doing is visiting with Tony Blair there in order to make—to catch up on what he is doing to help the Palestinians. Look, developing a state out of—is difficult. There's got to be institutions that provide stability, and it's hard to do.

That's what happening in Iraq. It's hard to go from dictatorship, like they had in Iraq, to one in which there is solid institutions that will enable a democracy to survive. I have come to the conclusion that it's absolutely necessary work for the sake of peace because if we're in an ideological struggle, the only way to defeat the ideology that preys upon fear and hate is through the development of societies that respond to the will of the people. And democracies—it turns out, democracies throughout our history tend not to fight each other because democracies respond to the will of the people, and most people do not want war and bloodshed and violence. Most people just want to live a normal, peaceful life.

I tell the American people all the time that Iraqi mothers want the same thing for their children that American mothers want for theirs, a place for their child to grow up and get a good education and be able to realize dreams. Same thing for the Palestinian mothers and the Israeli mothers. There's a commonality there, and yet, unfortunately, in the world in which we live today, there are people who simply do not like the idea of societies based upon the will of the people and will use violence to stop the advance of freedom. And it's not just in the Palestinian Territories that you find the violence; you find it in Lebanon; you find it in Iraq; you find it in Afghanistan; you find it in Pakistan.

Q. You find it in Gaza.

The President. Yes. You find people who will kill innocent life to stop the advance of freedom, which should call the world to—should cause the world to rally. If killers want to stop liberty, it should be a clear signal to all of us that we must do everything we can to advance liberty. And one of the things I find very hopeful about a Palestinian state is that many in the world want to help the Palestinians develop institutions and stability. And I—President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad are committed to the development of a state. They need a lot of help. And one of the things we can provide help for—besides some practical help on organizing their security forces and, obviously, to encourage

investment—is to—there's got to be a vision, see. People have got to be for something. And that's where we're trying to take the process over the next year.

Iraq/U.S. Foreign Policy/President's Decisionmaking

Q. Mr. President, you just mentioned Iraq. Can you clarify to us whether there was any Israeli involvement in your decision to invade Iraq?

The President. No, not at all. None whatsoever. My decision was based upon U.S. intelligence, based upon the desire to provide security for our peoples and others. It was based upon my willingness to work with the international community on this issue. Remember, if you look back at the history, there was a unanimous vote in the Security Council: disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. And when he defied, when he refused to allow the inspectors in, when he made a statement by his actions that he didn't really care what the international community said, that I decided to make sure words meant something.

And so I acted based upon our own security interests. And—but it also fit into this notion of—and remember, Zarqawi—there was some terrorist connections, not with the 9/11 attacks, but terrorist connections—Abu Nadal; he had been using—he'd been funding families of suicide bombers. In other words, as far as we were concerned, he had weapons of mass destruction, which could have been used in a deadly way. It turns out, he didn't have the weapons, but he had the know-how on how to make weapons, which could easily have been reconstituted. The sanctions regime turns out to have been corrupt and wasn't working. In other words, there's a variety of aspects to my decision, all of which were aimed at making sure that U.S. security, first and foremost, was enhanced.

National Security Council Press Secretary Gordon Johndroe. One last question.

2008 Presidential Election

Q. You follow the primaries now, in America.

The President. Yes. [*Laughter*]

Q. We wonder if there is a moment when you tell yourself, wow, why can't I join the fray?

The President. That's interesting.

Q. I can do it better. [*Laughter*]

The President. No, no, I appreciate that question. It's a very interesting question. I believe strongly that democracies are enhanced by change—by the peaceful change of government. And as much as I'll miss being President—and there will be a lot of aspects I'll miss about it—it is in our Nation's interests that there be a healthy debate and that the process move on. And so I'm realistic about what's going to happen this year.

You know, I loved campaigning. We were reminiscing at the ranch this weekend, Laura and I and some friends were, about how exciting Presidential campaigns can be. And I also understand how grueling they can be. This is a time of high anxiety for campaigns and candidates as they come in the final day of the Iowa caucuses. I can remember distinctly what it felt like campaigning in these States——

Q. In the snow.

The President. ——in the snow—on the last day. And so there's a lot of excitement to it. But I'm very comfortable about this year. We've got a lot to do. We've got a lot to do domestically and a lot to do internationally. I fully understand there's going to be a lot of focus on the Presidential primaries and the Presidential general election, which is good; there ought to be a healthy debate. In the meantime, however, I am not going to allow domestic politics to get in the way of implementing a vision, of doing—laying that foundation for peace, one of the things history will look back on.

President's Legacy

Q. When you are talking about vision, Mr. President—and this will be our last question—how do you wish to be remembered in world history?

The President. Well, first of all, I'll be dead before the true history of the Bush administration is written. Here in the Oval Office, there are portraits of two Presidents, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

In the past couple of years, I have read extensive analyses of both of those men's Presidencies. My attitude is that it's going to take awhile for objective historians to realize the contributions that this administration has made to peace.

Q. Like Harry Truman's legacy, which developed.

The President. Well, each President has his own set of circumstances with which to deal. I would hope that people, when they look back at this administration, would say that President Bush and his administration worked diligently to protect the American people from harm; that he recognized the threats of the 21st century; that he acted in a—when he needed to be tough, he acted strong, and when he needed to have vision, he understood the power of freedom to be transformative.

Our foreign policy is more than just confronting terrorists. Our foreign policy is to confront the conditions that enable these ideologues to recruit, such as HIV/AIDS on the continent of Africa or feeding the hungry or dealing with malaria. Our foreign policy is based upon our great trust in the capacity of the common person to dictate a peaceful course for government. But just so you know, I fully understand I'll be long gone before the accurate history of this administration is reflected in the history books.

Q. In our country, you won't have to wait so long.

The President. Well, I don't worry about it, sir. I just really don't. It's such an honor to be the President. You betray the office if you get so caught up in your own personal—your personal standing. I remind people that the President should—must understand, like in the Middle East, that the conditions must be ripe for people to go for peace, and that you cannot force peace based upon a President's calendar. You can use the calendar by saying to the parties, you know this guy; you know his vision; now is the time for you to come to conclusion. But a President must never try to force others to accept something that they themselves don't want to accept because there will be—it won't last.

Now, we can work hard—and I believe the time is ripe, that's what I'm trying to say to you. We've got leaders who have made commitments to a vision. They have both told me and told each other, we are committed. And these men know me. And so I believe—to answer your question—yes, there will be a comprehensive peace signed by the end of this year, because if they're committed, like they say they are—and I believe they are, and I believe their people, the majority of the people want there to be peace—now is the time to move.

Anyway.

Mr. Johndroe. Thanks, guys.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 9:55 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipora "Tzipi" Livini and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak of Israel; President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority; and Quartet Representative in the Middle East Tony Blair. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 4. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Interview With Foreign Print Media

January 4, 2008

The President. How are you doing? Welcome. Pleasure to be with you all. Thank you.

What are the ground rules here, Dana, in terms of the American press?

Press Secretary Dana Perino. It's all on the record, but can't be used until after these fine folks are able to publish.

The President. Yes, so delay your stories, will you? [*Laughter*]

Q. It's very hospitable of you, Mr. President.

The President. A couple of things—one, I'm excited about going on the trip. I have never been to Saudi Arabia. I have never been to Bahrain. I have never been to Kuwait. I have been to Egypt. I have not been to the Palestinian Territories or Israel as a sitting President.

So this is a really good opportunity to travel and be with friends and have frank discussions about particularly three items: one, the United States commitment to the peace process; that what happened in Annapolis is